



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
March 10, 2018

Dear Interested Party:

This letter is to notify you that a decision has been made regarding a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed grazing lease renewal and expansion on a portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA). The decision is to move forward with the proposed action. The lease will allow grazing livestock as a management tool to enhance the subsequent availability and palatability of fall and spring forage on that portion of the BTWMA described in the Draft Grazing Management Environmental Assessment and Plan provided for public review in February 2018.

No modifications were made in the documents you received/reviewed after the public review period. Please consider your previous copies of the Environmental Assessment and Draft Grazing Plan along with the stipulations of this Decision Notice as final.

Comments received regarding the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area Proposal are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed grazing lease renewal on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. This Decision Notice will be provided to the Fish & Wildlife Commission for a final decision to approve/disapprove the proposed lease at their regularly scheduled meeting April 19, 2018.

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gary Bertellotti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" and last name "Bertellotti" clearly distinguishable.

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
gbertellotti@mt.gov

DECISION NOTICE

BEARTOOTH WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA Grazing Lease Renewal Proposal

PROPOSAL

The proposal is to implement a six-year grazing lease on a portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA). The 36,000-acre BTWMA is located in west-central Montana along the western and northern edge of the Big Belt Mountains, occupying land in both Lewis & Clark and Cascade Counties. The proposed grazing lease would utilize principles of rest-rotation and spot treatment grazing to maintain and/or enhance wildlife habitat for the resource and public benefit on approximately 9,520 acres of the BTWMA. Additionally, the proposed lease would incorporate 26,300 deeded Sieben Live Stock, 2,200 acres BLM and 320 acres DNRC lands into the grazing system. This cooperative effort would allow FWP to maintain and enhance habitat for wildlife and fisheries over a large landscape adjacent to the BTWMA. Total project area encompasses about 38,340 acres of private and public lands. Specifically, this proposed grazing plan is designed to improve habitat quality and quantity for a variety of wildlife species, particularly elk, mule and white-tailed deer, ruffed and dusky grouse and a variety of nongame wildlife species. Livestock grazing has been utilized as a habitat management tool on the BTWMA in a similar fashion with adjacent and cooperating lessee Sieben Live Stock Company since 1992.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beartooth Wildlife Management Area grazing lease renewal proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment.

A 30-day public comment period ran from February 5 through March 6, 2016. Public notices of the draft Grazing Lease Renewal Proposal and Environmental Assessment were placed on the FWP web site, were announced in a news release to the area and statewide newspaper outlets and sent to interested parties via on the FWP Region 4 EA mailing list (State Library, Cascade Co. Commissioners, L&C County Commissioners, Cascade Co. Conservation District, EQC, DEQ, local Conservation Groups, etc.). Hard copies were available at the FWP Region 4 office in Great Falls and were offered via mail and email upon request.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Solicitation of public input resulted in receipt of 12 comments. Comments were received as e-mail responses (two with attached letters). The responses came from four (4) organized groups (Montana Sportsmen Alliance, Lewis & Clark County Farm Bureau, Helena Hunters & Anglers Association and Western Landowners Alliance), with the remainder from private individuals. Eleven comments were in support of the proposal, with one being neutral/negative. Following are verbatim comments received during the comment period.

1. Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,
I support the Grazing Lease on the BWMA. I know from experience that grazing helps most pastures, and with the access that the public gets this is a win/win for the public. I also like the fact that the FWP is cooperating with a neighbor. Thank You.
Bert Otis

PO Box 60
Emigrant, MT 590027

2. I am in favor of this lease. Lessee has a very good reputation and it looks to be a very well thought out plan. It is under good management with both the Lessee and the MFW&P group. I believe it will be beneficial to the land and the public.
Don Harland
Cascade, MT
3. I would like to give my support for this grazing lease as I believe it is important to keep our ranchers in business and just as important I believe that Elk and Mule Deer actually benefit from cattle grazing
Michael J DiAngelis
141 Chestnut Valley Rd.
Cascade MT 59421
4. I am writing in support of the renewal of the Bear Tooth Wildlife Management Area grazing proposal. I have seen result of over grazing on private land caused by 800 elk in a single group, and I feel that cattle grazing the BTWMA is fair compensation for the private landowners tolerance of this elk herd. I understand the science of the rest rotation grazing system and how it contributes to improving the health of the ecosystem. The current rest rotation grazing system which involves the BTWMA is working well and I support the renewal of the proposed grazing lease.

Dan Anthony

Joplin, MT

5. **From:** lauren.m.vansickle@gmail.com [<mailto:lauren.m.vansickle@gmail.com>]
Sent: Friday, February 09, 2018 11:12 AM
I fully support the Beartooth WMA grazing lease renewal and expansion proposal. As a sports(wo)man, outdoor enthusiast, and (wannabe) rancher, I feel and believe the livestock "rest-rotation and spot treatment grazing" plan is essential to enhance wildlife habitat and the overall health and wellbeing of the Big Belt Mountain range in central Montana
6. The grazing proposal sounded very good. Sounds like good science and well thought out. I support the grazing proposal. Vince Luparell
7. To: Whom it May Concern RE Draft EA for Grazing Lease on BTWMA

I am writing to express support for the draft EA as proposed with the lessee, Sieben Livestock Company. SLC sets the standard for grazing management that results in a win-win-win for public wildlife, ranching, and health of soil, water, and vegetation. SLC is highly respected in the ranching, sportsmen, and environmental communities and their management on both public and private lands represents a tremendous value to the public.

Sincerely,
Cole Mannix
Western Landowners Alliance
Helena, MT

8. BTWMA Grazing Proposal

I am writing in favor of the proposed grazing lease on the Beartooth WMA. The rest-rotation practices that have generally been in place for the past 25+ years have been shown to reduce the abuse caused by continuous livestock grazing while promoting healthy all season forage for various game and non-game wildlife. The additional acreage being brought into the system by Sieben Live Stock also substantially improves FWP's abilities to meet certain objectives over a larger landscape. Sieben Live Stock's participation in the rest-rotation system is a critical part of this program, including the areas ability to support an abundance of healthy wildlife, as well as allowing public access to their lands through participation in the Block Management program.

Kelly St. Onge

9. Cory, I fully support the BTWMA Grazing plan as propose. It is innovative and science based with common sense and long range benefits for habitat improvement as well as maintaining the already excellent conditions on the WMA

The partnership aspect with the livestock/land owner is another strong component that impacts access for all types of recreation, as well as enhances land owner/sportsmen relations. Thanks for all your work and dedication to this project.

John Borgreen

10. The Lewis & Clark County Farm Bureau would like to express its support for implementing a grazing lease on the Beartooth WMA. Grazing is a vital component to maintaining healthy rangelands. Without managed grazing, it is well known that vegetation becomes dense and decadent, and in turn reduces grass production and palatability to wildlife. Thus, reducing the habitat quality. A lack of managed grazing also increases fuel loads, which in turn leads to increased resource damage in the event of a fire. Thank you for implementing proper management of our rangelands.

Karl Christians
LCCFB President
East Helena, MT

11. Attached letter – Montana Sportsmen Alliance

12. Attached letter – Helena Hunters and Anglers Association

FWP Response to Helena Hunters and Anglers Association questions:

- The Upper Cottonwood area as questioned by HHAA was grazed (by design) in 2017, which is approximately 400 acres of the WMA. The pasture is included in a rest rotation grazing plan which has been implemented since 2006. This constitutes 1.1% of the total WMA acreage. Grazing can displace elk to nearby locations for about 2-4 weeks when it is scheduled for use by livestock. Elk return soon thereafter feeding on new re-growth. This pasture is almost 8 miles from Sieben HQ and has no effect on the neighbors outfitting nor hunting opportunity on the WMA as cattle use is during the spring and summer months and are required to be off the WMA by September 1. Contrary to HHAA comments, summer/fall 2016 and 2017 the BTWMA held 1,000 – 1,500 elk during the archery and rifle seasons, hunters having the best archery season on record harvesting over 30 bull elk and rifle hunters harvesting over 50 bulls and 115 antlerless elk (of 250 antlerless licenses), also one of the best seasons since the BTWMA was purchased by

FWP in 1970. The past two winters the BTWMA has wintered over 3,000 elk in 2016 and 2017 winters, also the most since its purchase.

- Sieben Live Stock (lessee) in this proposed partnership would qualify for an "exchange of use" fee schedule for grazing the BTWMA and Whitetail Prairie. This fee is derived by FWP's grazing stipulations which are also defined in the EA. The intent of \$0 Exchange of Use is NOT to expand the herd size through grazing on the WMA. It is instead to use the WMA as an incentive for managing livestock grazing in a manner that meets wildlife objectives. The proposed WMA grazing lease incorporates 28,500 acres private lands that provide important wildlife habitat values (as determined by FWP) and comprises 75% of the total grazing system. The lessee also provides services and maintenance that at least meet minimums required to qualify for the low grazing rate as set forth in FWP's Grazing Lessee Responsibilities Document. Following these FWP guidelines in this proposed lease, the lessee provides almost 75% of the land base in the proposed lease agreement. With this proposed lease, FWP is able to maintain and/or enhance wildlife and fishery habitats on an additional 28,500 acres adjacent to the Beartooth WMA. Thus, the lessee would qualify for the Exchange of Use Fee = \$0.00. Along with the additional 28,500 acres of habitat enhancement through grazing management adjacent to the BTWMA, the lessee also provides public hunting access as per lease requirements. In exchange for grazing FWP lands involved in this proposed lease (Beartooth WMA), Sieben Live Stock also agrees to continue to allow reasonable free public hunting on their deeded lands during Fish & Wildlife Commission approved seasons. Sieben Live Stock has been enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program since the programs' inception. Sieben Live Stock has 68,400 acres enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program and provides at least 2,000 public hunter days annually for all big game species and sexes (via unlimited access / park and walk access) and is a model Landowner to area sportspeople.

DECISION

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis, Grazing Plan and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature of the public comment, acceptance of this grazing proposal on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area is warranted. After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support and comment, it is my recommendation that FWP proceed with the grazing lease renewal and expansion as described on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. This Decision Notice will be provided to the Fish & Wildlife Commission for a final decision to approve/disapprove the proposed lease at their regularly scheduled meeting April 19, 2018.

Signed,



Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
gbertellotti@mt.gov

BTWMA Grazing Proposal Environmental Assessment Decision Notice Mailing List

Bert Otis
Don Harland
Michael J DiAngelis
Dan Anthony
Lauren VanSickle
Cole Mannix -Western Landowners Alliance
Kelly St. Onge
John Borgreen
Karl Christians – LCC Farm Bureau
Montana Sportsmen Alliance
Helena Hunters and Anglers



528 West Lawrence St Helena, MT 59601
406-202-2457

March 6, 2018

RE: Beartooth WMA grazing plan

Dear Montana FWP,

Helena Hunters and Anglers (HHAA) is dedicated to protecting and restoring fish and wildlife to all suitable habitats, and to conserving all natural resources as a public trust, vital to our general welfare. HHAA promotes the highest standards of ethical conduct and sportsmanship, and promotes outdoor recreation opportunity for all citizens to share equally.

While we believe that cattle grazing may benefit elk and other wildlife under some controlled circumstances, this has not been our members' observation on the Beartooth WMA the last few years.

Particularly in the Upper Cottonwood drainage our members have observed the WMA to be heavily grazed. Not surprisingly, elk appear to favor the adjacent private land while avoiding the heavily grazed drainage on the WMA. Based on our observations in 2017, we question if there's a problem with "decadent residual vegetation" in the Upper Cottonwood area and believe the elk are using Sieben Livestock pastures because the WMA has been heavily grazed. We also note that Sieben hosts outfitted hunters for the first few weeks of the general season, a time when in 2017 range condition in the Upper Cottonwood was poor.

While we are not opposed to trading free grazing of the WMA to Sieben in exchange for public access, we are interested in knowing how many hunter days

are actually logged in on Sieben Livestock and how to ensure an equitable trade. We believe that the trade of grass on the WMA for public access to Sieben Livestock could be a fair 'trade', but only if access to the private property is open to the public, not simply to hunters who may have a long-term connection to the ranch. We ask that no-reservation, public, walk-in hunting be a condition of the grazing-for-access 'trade.'

Elk and other wildlife are not going to be harmed if Sieben cattle do not graze the WMA for a few years. We believe that the current "trade" may benefit a few hunters, while degrading the public opportunity on FWP's wildlife management area. Furthermore, we feel that the Block Management which is used to compensate Sieben Livestock for granting existing public access should be a sufficient means, not requiring additional grazing rights.

Please add Helena Hunters and Anglers on your list of "interested publics" for future meetings and field trips regarding the Beartooth WMA.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stan Frasier".

President, Helena Hunters and Anglers Association

Cc: Nick Gevock, Montana Wildlife Federation

February 17, 2018

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
BTWMA Grazing Lease Proposal
Attn: Cory Loecker
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405

Dear Mr. Loecker,

The Montana Sportsmen Alliance (MSA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Department's proposed Beartooth Wildlife Management Area 6-Year Grazing Lease with Sieben Live Stock. We have reviewed the Environmental Assessment and find the document well prepared and inclusive. Furthermore, as advocates of managing public trust resources well, we commend both the Department Staff and the Sieben for the collaborative efforts that integrate public wildlife and private land's goals and objectives. We note that this effort is significant in scale, particularly in the contribution of private land acreage and cooperation. This is a reflection of the trust and respect that has been mutually developed by all parties and of the overarching umbrella of grassroots support that the Devil's Kitchen Working Group has played in this landscape.

Specifically, the proposal effectively expands the conservation "footprint" of the BTWMA by incorporating significant acreage from Sieben Live Stock into a cooperative rest rotation grazing system. That system also provides additional grass "insurance" for Sieben relative to documented changes in weather patterns that have resulted in a warmer drier trend over time. We endorse the idea of managing this portion of the WMA and adjacent private lands for spring, summer and fall benefits to wildlife and fisheries and to accommodate continued public access for hunting purposes. We recognize the variability in elk distribution that will occur over time under different treatments and varying precipitation rates. We also agree with previous decisions to segregate other portions of the WMA that prioritize winter range habitat for big game species from this grazing lease. We do recommend that displaying geo-referenced winter big game survey information collected over time would help visually reinforce this course of action. We also suggest that grassland breeding bird surveys be instituted to offer another metric of wildlife response to responsible grazing management over time. Given the rationale provided for in the EA, we have no problem supporting the proposed Exchange of Use Fee = \$0.

From our perspective, this type of management and interaction reflect what is possible when different interests look for common ground. It's a refreshing piece of work at this point in time.

Montana Sportsmen Alliance Leadership Group

Joe Perry - Brady
John Borggreen – Great Falls
JW Westman – Laurel
Robert Woods – Hamilton
Sam Milodragovich – Butte
Steve Schindler – Glasgow
Jeff Herbert - Helena

